

## **Ten Tips for Talking with Children about a Traumatic Event**

**Gerard Costa, Ph.D., and Kaitlin Mulcahy, Ph.D.**

1. Ask children what they know and what they have heard. Listen to the child's story and follow the child's lead. Ask children what they know and have heard. Use simple language and correct any misunderstood accounts. Tell a child what they need to know, not all that you know.
2. Be there and be calm. Monitor your own emotion and tone of voice. Pay attention to your gestures, affect, and voice because children pay special attention to these ways of communicating. Children scan the faces, voices and movements of others to discern safety. Your presence, voice, words, soft and loving touches, provide each child with the best ways of feeling safe.
3. Share your feelings: It is okay and important for children to know that the adults in their lives have the same feelings when bad things happen. Let children know you feel these feelings and that you are there for them. Ask about their feelings. Often children will experience and express their feelings through their body states. Ask them "what" and "where" they feel (e.g. head, tummy, chest, neck, etc.) as well as "how" do they feel.
4. Practice conversations with other adults. Use simple language. Avoid imposing meanings or interpretations.
5. Limit repeated exposure to images and reports of the events: When children do see images or reports of tragedies, Fred Rogers of Mr. Rogers Neighborhood suggested that we help them "look for all the people who are helping".
6. Remember the 3R's of security: Relationships, Routines and Restoration: Highlight relationships with familiar and consistent caregivers, family and friends. Protect and increase routines that are familiar and normalizing such as play time, going to school, reading books, and other patterned activities.
7. Provide structure and communicate safety: Uncertainty is the province of adulthood. While we as adults may feel unsure of the possibility of future tragedies, disasters, or traumatic events, we must always let children know that we will take care of them and protect them. Children thrive when provided structure and safety.
8. Remember to take care of yourself: If the adults in a child's life are overwhelmed, overstressed and overtired, it will be more difficult to be safe, secure and stable for the child. Pay attention to the "ABC's" of self-care: awareness, balance and connection, in your own life.
9. A sense of mastery can help alleviate fear and uncertainty. Encourage your children to get involved in a community or service program such as collecting items for a food bank, involvement in an event or gathering where they experience a culture outside of their own, visiting the sick or those who are alone, engagement in service to others.
10. Recognize that there are some feelings that we can only share and cannot fix: Children need us to be there with and for them at such times. It's appropriate to both not have an answer and be with the children in their sadness and confusion.